

It Costs Us Nothing

By W. T. COUCH



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"Keep on hearing but understand not,
And keep on seeing, but know not!"
Make the minds of this people gross,
Dull their ears and besmear their eyes,
Lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
And have a mind to understand, and turn, and be healed.

—ISAIAH

HENRY REGNERY COMPANY

Hinsdale, Illinois

1948

THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM T. COUCH has been Director of the University of Chicago Press since 1945. From 1925 until he came to Chicago he was associated with the University of North Carolina Press, from 1932 as Director. Under his guidance, the University of North Carolina Press became one of the leading university presses in the United States, distinguishing itself particularly by the publication of books related to the South.

He has contributed to literary journals, and was the editor of, and a contributor to, *CULTURE OF THE SOUTH*.

IT COSTS US NOTHING



I

Is the world any nearer universal peace and justice than it was a quarter-century ago after the first World War?

What has happened to the hopes of the Atlantic Charter "for a better future for the World"? How many nations on the globe enjoy freedom of speech and religion, freedom from want of physical necessities, and freedom from the fears bred by tyranny? Are any gains being made toward these objectives? Or is America again putting dollars first and in danger of forgetting and betraying her own and the world's highest hopes?

I propose to answer this question with an example, one of which I have first-hand knowledge.

This example has to do with American book publishers. In talking about American book publishers, I realize that I am talking about a numerically and financially inconsiderable group. But intellectually and morally it is one of the most important in the country. A large proportion of the members of this group in the past have combined in themselves the finest qualities of sensitiveness and devotion to the general welfare, national and international, along with a resolute and spirited independence, an unwillingness to follow the trend and run with the crowd merely in order to be agreeable or to fill their pocketbooks. I doubt whether the members of any other group in American life have embodied in themselves so vigorous and healthy a combination of these qualities. When American book publishers begin losing these qualities, there can be little doubt most

other groups in the country have already lost them or are far along in this process.

What are American book publishers doing that they can be used as an example of dollars first, of forgetfulness and betrayal?

II

"The United Kingdom," says a prominent American book publisher in an article entitled "A Plea to Reason," in *The Publishers Weekly* of November 1, 1947, "is at present . . . in need of acquiring American dollars."

"The United States," the author goes on, "in order to maintain its economy, and in order to support the colossal national debt resulting from the prosecution of World War II, is also in need of export business."

The author's argument is directed toward the publishers of the United Kingdom. They, he says, "are endeavoring to solve the problem of book distribution on the one hand and of acquiring dollars for their industry on the other without taking occasion to work out long distance plans with the book publishers of the United States."

Whether American book publishers would take "occasion to work out long distance plans with the book publishers" of the United Kingdom, I do not know; but there is some evidence they might be willing to do so. They have taken "occasion to work out long distance plans" among themselves and so far as I am aware it was unnecessary in accomplishing this end for the author of the "Plea" to exert himself greatly in pleading with them.

American book publishers today are organized in two trade associations, The American Book Publishers Council and the American Textbook Publishers Institute. Every publisher who belongs to these organizations has by virtue of his membership given at least tacit approval to the following policies:

1. The use of the U. S. State Department as a foreign agent in the effort to get larger markets for U. S. books;
2. The making of U. S. loans to foreign countries with the condition that portions of the loans be allocated for the purchase of U. S. books;

3. The use of political pressure through trade associations, and lobbies financed by trade associations to make these policies effective;
4. The submission of books to Unesco "to determine their treatment of other nations."

What do the proponents of these policies have to say in favor of them?

The author of "A Plea to Reason," an active participant in both associations, says nothing directly about these policies. But it is not difficult to see that all except the fourth could easily grow out of his attitude and I think we can be fairly sure he would raise no serious objections to this one, unless his interests as head of a great firm required that he do so. Is business his only interest? Let him answer:

"The English have invented a saying that 'trade follows the book.' May it not also truthfully be said that the book will contribute more to the cultural values of the world than any other means of communication?" And, in final summary, "I make this 'plea to reason,' because I feel certain that the American and British publishers may be developing an impasse which can only result in (1) books in the English language not receiving maximum use and influence throughout the world, (2) a new and growing world public for books in English feeling itself needlessly deprived of books which it needs, and finally, (3) revenues of both English and American authors being materially reduced."

The Managing Director of The American Book Publishers' Council, in a recent letter, had among other things the following to say:

"It is true . . . [the] Chairman of the Council's Foreign Trade Committee and I have done considerable corresponding and have had a number of interviews over the course of months with State Department Officials in the Office of Information and Educational Exchange with a view to insuring a continuing interest on their part in books. In those contacts the Department never lost an opportunity to let us know that it welcomed such interest and offers of cooperation on our part. It will interest you to know, moreover, that recent items in the Council Bulletin on this subject appeared largely because in the past

few months State Department officials have several times approached us, rather than we them, saying that if they could be assured of the interest of American publishers in developing the foreign market for their books, the Department was prepared to make an all-out effort in support of its profound belief in such a program. The State Department believes, as my Foreign Trade Committee and I do, that in the war devastated countries of the world books of a technical, educational, medical and morale-building nature are desperately needed—books that will make available, to those who for so many years have been deprived of it, information on the American technological 'Know-how' and way of life. The free interchange between countries of just such information is, incidentally, a basic concept of the United States [sic] Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) as a means of fulfilling its objectives of 'establishing permanent peace and security throughout the world.' "

In commenting on the charge that this was imperialism the Managing Director said: "I am afraid I do not understand your definition of the word 'imperialism.' If the effort by book publishers, through the Council, to promote a better understanding of this country, and thus to contribute to 'peace and security throughout the world,' fits the meaning you attach to imperialism, I tell you frankly that I personally am in favor of more and more of it."

One other thing that the Managing Director favors may be of some interest. In a circular letter last summer he suggested to members of The American Book Publishers Council that they write to members of Congress urging continued financial support by the government of *The United States Quarterly Book List*, a review edited by the Library of Congress and sent free of charge into all parts of the world as a means of informing other peoples concerning American books. In his circular letter the Managing Director noted that the book list was a "valuable vehicle" and "... it costs the American book publishing industry nothing."

To leave the impression that the Managing Director alone favored this would be unfair. Apparently some of the Council's members, among them practically all the important book publishers of the country, were willing to go along with him. The

Council still exists and nothing has been said to indicate that this policy is not the official one.

When this attitude toward the federal treasury was questioned, the Managing Director replied, "Perhaps my choice of words when I said 'it costs the American book publishing industry nothing' were [sic] not as tactful as they [sic] might have been. My reason for them was to allay the fears of a few publishers that they might be asked financially to underwrite the cost of this government publication."

I have quoted at length from correspondence with the Managing Director of the American Book Publishers' Council and have given, I believe, adequate evidence of the Council's concern, as stated in a bulletin of last summer, "to aid [the State Department] in effectuating an increase in U. S. dollar allocation on the part of foreign governments to permit their importation of increased quantities of American books." It would be less than fair if after all this attention to the Council, no attention was given to The American Textbook Publishers Institute.

This organization reveals exactly where it stands in the minutes of the meeting of its Board of Directors on October 23, 1947. I quote: "It has been well established that other countries, some friendly, some unfriendly, have consistently used scientific, technical and educational literature as a wedge for introducing industrial products and equipment, and for extending economic and cultural relations generally." The Institute "urges the government of the United States to specify, when loans are made to other countries, that a certain fraction of dollar exchange be allocated to the acquirement of scientific, technical and educational books and periodicals of United States origin, and to provide, when drawing up trade treaties, that reasonable quantities of such books and periodicals shall be supplied as well as capital and other goods. In this connection the [Foreign Trade] Council takes note of the fact that in several parts of the world the ideology of Russia and our own ideology are competing for acceptance and that in such competition books are a vital factor, carrying in durable and permanent form the evidence of our culture, of the knowledge and know-how that are among the greatest things we have to offer other peoples."

I have made the charge in a number of letters that these

policies involve cartel-like activities, and that activities of this kind may in the long run prove no more healthy for Americans than for Germans.

I have tried to suggest that if American arguments relative to the equality of all men were understood by Americans, these policies could never have been proposed, much less adopted.

I have argued that it is a dangerous thing to submit books to Unesco for it "to determine their treatment of other nations," since such action is only a form of censorship.

I have tried finally to convey the notion that conscience and problems of evil are involved in all these matters.

I have to report my letters were total failures.

One of the editors of *The Publishers' Weekly* wrote me explaining why the *Weekly* had not published a letter I sent them on November 10:

"I read the letter and as Aaron told you over the phone, it was something of a bombshell. I had not the faintest idea what you were talking about. . . . We are at sea to understand your reference to cartels. . . . I cannot see what good the comparison with the Germans does to achieve clarity, though it may relieve your feelings quite a bit. . . . The paragraph about weakening other imperialisms by war completely dazed me. . . . Nobody understands what you mean about blackmailing the British out of the largest and most important portions of their empire. . . . all of us have spent at least a full day apiece studying the letter. . . ."

Even though it may not be understood, I believe I ought to say here that I am attacking policies, not persons. And again, I know Isaiah too well not to know that the man who thinks he cannot make a mistake—even a terrible one—does not know much about himself or about man or the equality that prevails among men.

And, again, in attempting to explain, I run into the problem of communication, into the practical impossibility of saying anything of any importance that anybody today can understand. I hope I will be able always to remember and understand at least a little of the old remarks about the mote and the beam and the physician who needed to heal himself. And when I make an argument and it is not understood, and I repeat with variations, and it still does not register, I hope that I will not

then prove myself another one of those who know it all and were going to save the world and end up by wanting to use force to make people understand.

III

We have now arrived at the point where we have to ask what are these trade associations, The American Book Publishers Council and The American Textbook Publishers Institute, if they are not cartels? Are they groups of private entrepreneurs cooperating in seeking world markets? Yes. Are they using government support? Yes. Are they seeking to force their products on other countries? The answer is yes.

In what ways do these American book publishers' cartels differ from Nazi cartels? The Nazi cartels, we hope, are dead; these are certainly alive. And they publish American books, democratic books, books that condemn cartels as sources of evil, that condemn the collaboration of governments and industries in securing foreign markets, books that blasted the Nazis for blocking (allocating) foreign credits and forcing unwanted goods on their neighbors, books that condemn all these practices as the prime cause of war and the chief enemy of democracy.

Is it possible that American book publishers are unaware of the real nature of the activities in which they are engaged? I think we can be sure they don't know. While book publishers are intellectually and morally among the best of the country, they are not greatly superior to people generally, and all that is necessary to fool them is to give ancient evils attractive new names. How many American book publishers have not issued bitter attacks on the use of cartels to achieve imperial power? How many in recent years have issued books defending any kind of imperialism anywhere?

And why rail I on this Commodity?
But for because he hath not wooed me yet.
Not that I have the power to clutch my hand
When his fair angels would salute my palm;
But for my hand, as unattempted yet,

Like a poor beggar, raileth on the rich.
Well, whiles I am a beggar, I will rail,
But say there is no sin but to be rich;
And being rich, my virtue then shall be
To say there is no vice but beggary.

Does the cloud in the publishing sky look like a heavenly host descending to earth bringing peace, or like a train of cartels rushing to establish a world empire?

Take, for instance, the argument that Europe wants American books. Why then the pressure for allocations to purchase here? If they really want to buy and we lend them the money to buy, can't they be trusted to make their own allocations—if this process has to be followed—without benefit of U. S. State Department advice or pressure?

It is argued that Europeans need to learn about democracy, that American books will help offset communism, will spread knowledge of the American Way of Life, will help Save Democracy. But is there no knowledge and experience of democracy in Europe?

What, for instance, can Europeans learn from the United States about freedom or equality that they cannot learn from Sweden, Norway, Holland, Denmark, Switzerland? Do England and France really need to go to school to America?

Why should the Dutch have to buy books from the United States rather than from the French, or the Swiss, or the British, or the Norwegians, or the Swedish, or the Danish, or the Belgians? Can these countries, all of them either former allies or friendly neutrals, not be trusted to decide what they need most and where to buy it? Why should any of these countries be required, as a condition of a loan, to buy anything from us rather than each other? Why shouldn't we help them to get what they need wherever they can get it?

Europe hasn't forgotten the trade practices forced on weaker countries in the period 1933-1939, practices that demoralized European economic intercourse and earned hatred for those who did the forcing. The same Europeans who have the duty of negotiating loans, and who at the moment do not object to the forced allocation of loans for American books or some other

American product—perhaps out of fear that otherwise the loans will not be made—will not be able to ignore the parallel with notorious precedents; neither will America when it realizes what it has done.

The parallel is, of course, not complete and perfect. There can be no doubt the State Department and the trade associations have felt their motives to be primarily altruistic and in the service of democracy. But even in the case of the Germans, when they have a government and can ask for a loan, there is room for grave doubt whether this method would not do incomparably more damage than good. To use it with other countries, among them former allies, is a caricature of everything democracy is supposed to stand for. If the book publishers of the United States want to earn contempt and deserve it, this is the policy to follow.

And why an allocation for books any more than for medicine, food, clothes, machinery? Where will a policy of allocating to please pressure groups lead?

IV

The argument that Europeans need American books to learn about democracy, equality, and freedom is worth examining a little.

What is this freedom that Americans understand so well, that they can explain to everybody else? Is it the freedom to enter world affairs when they please and withdraw when they please? Is it the freedom to engage in long campaigns of criticism of other imperialisms, of weakening them by blackmail and war, and then proceeding to take over in the name of democracy? Is it the freedom of the citizen in the face of his community and nation? And, if it is, how long can this freedom last when everybody takes the attitude that anything that costs them nothing is all right? What state of mind among book publishers could make them incapable of seeing or being concerned about the argument their trade association head made to them in the bulletin quoted above: "It costs the American book publishing industry nothing"? What state of mind would make it possible for this man to say in explanation: "Perhaps

my choice of words when I said 'it costs the American book publishing industry nothing' were [sic] not as tactful as they [sic] might have been"?

Yes, pious, sentimental words, democratic words, freedom and equality words, could have been used, rather than words that said in effect: *everybody else has his fingers in government pockets, why shouldn't we too?* But would the use of different words, more "tactful" words, make the nature of the action essentially different? Does it make any difference whether "tactful" or truthful words are used on occasions of this kind?

Or again, to get back to this freedom that America understands and everybody else in the world needs—is it the freedom to imitate the Nazis and at the same time to escape some day becoming like them? Or is it the freedom to eat out of the public trough, to reduce everybody to dependence on it, and escape wrecking the nation?

This is not American freedom. This is the great enemy of American freedom, this is the enemy of genuine freedom everywhere.

And what of the equality we are so anxious to export and that peoples elsewhere so desperately need? Where is it that the doctrine, my country right or wrong, is most popular? What nations in the last ten years have held this doctrine valid for their own people but not for the people of other lands?

Suppose the Germans and Japanese had won World War II. It is a reasonable assumption that if this had happened, the victors would have executed many of the leaders of the vanquished, perhaps even whole sections of the population. Does equality mean doing at least some of what the Nazis and Japanese might have done if they had won?

Or perhaps the notion of equality doesn't apply equally to Americans and Germans and Japanese? Perhaps Americans are by nature good, Germans and Japanese by nature evil? Most of our books say the differences that exist have been produced by differences in cultural heritage. The rest of the world needs to know this, wonderful news that it is.

All that is needed is a unifying idea, a unifying heritage—American book publishers have one ready and waiting. True, it is a little crude in its present form but doubtless more tactful words can be found. The great idea is: *it costs us nothing.*

There could be nothing more irresistible. There can be no doubt that ultimately, if America so chooses, allegiance will be given everywhere to this idea. And then there will be throughout the world one cultural heritage and all men will be equal to—does it need to be said? Who does not know the answer?

Why is it that in the United States today there is one truth for Anglo-Saxons, another for Jews, another for Germans, and still another for Negroes? Why is it that when the Negro problem is discussed, all men are equal, and, to take a very sore subject, segregation is always and everywhere a bad thing? And why is it that separation in a city is segregation, but separation in a state or region isn't—if it is Jews and not Negroes so segregated? Why is it that for Germans to establish a racial national state is bad, but for Jews to establish a Jewish state is good? And why is it that nobody mentions the possibility that if a well-governed Jewish state in Palestine is a good thing, a well-governed Negro state in Africa might be equally good? Why is it that for Anglo-Saxons to dominate the southern United States is bad, but for Jews to dominate a homeland in Palestine is good? Why is the possibility so rarely considered (except in discussing the American South) that Americans could commit crimes comparable to those of the Nazis? Is not the refusal to take this possibility into account equivalent to saying Americans are superior, Germans inferior?

Is there in existence any book of American (or other) origin worth the paper it is written on that deals honestly with these and the hundreds of related questions that cry for attention?

America today believe in equality? America doesn't even know what it is. And this is true not only of the people generally. It is true particularly of those intellectuals who have pretended to know.

What of equality in good or evil? Are there any such qualities in people? Can men truly be said to be more or less good or evil? What are the most important qualities that men may possess? What was it in the Nazis that made them commit their horrible crimes? Or perhaps the notion that Nazism was evil is merely a mode of speaking. The people who know, the scientists and the social scientists—do they use such language? Not as scientists. If science is the only way of getting at the truth (if I were a good citizen of the modern world I would

have to add: if there is any truth), is there any possibility that there will ever be shown to be any such reality as evil? What are the dominant ideas on this subject in the Western world, in America as well as Germany?

A little honesty on this problem on the part of the American public as well as American book publishers would not be the worst of all things.

Look at this. Nazism, it has been said over and over, was evil. But the great authority dominant everywhere in the Western World recognizes no such thing as evil. No scientist working with his test tubes and his microscopes, his weights and measures, his levers and tubes and chambers and all the other elaborate machinery with which the world blindly hopes he is discovering the nature of things has ever yet found one iota of evidence that any such thing as Nazism, as evil, exists. Is it likely that he ever will with the means that he uses? There is no prospect that any scientist will ever discover any method which men can use to identify evil. Evil is something science cannot see and cannot deal with in any way. For this reason men who accept science as the only valid authority in human life, unless custom and habit prevent, are easily transformed into beasts. This is the great weakness of the Western world, a weakness shared by all the other nations, America included, with Germany.

Nor has social science had any better record in isolating, identifying and defining evil. According to one of the great doctrines of contemporary social science, American as well as German, men do what they do because of their environment. But no American social scientist, moved by that quality of objectivity of which all scientists are so justly proud, has yet discovered that the rest of the world, in some very important senses, was Germany's environment, and was therefore responsible for Nazism. Strange, isn't it? Or is it so strange?

But what of the new "sciences" psychoanalysis and psychiatry? Here's a large mouth, indeed, that spits forth prophecies and promises What is the difference between an inhibition removed at a fee and the sale of an indulgence? And what of the devils that refuse to be exorcised? And how are devils dis-

tinguished from angels? There are more kinds of equality in this universe than one at first might think. What else are these disciplines equal or unequal to? They have the advantage of not being limited by techniques that preclude the possibility of their dealing with the most important human problems. They are not sciences. There is no more serious misapprehension concerning them than the widely prevailing notion that they are. They are opportunities for the development and application of practical wisdom, something the world sorely needs.

I had the very pleasant experience recently of hearing a practitioner of one of these disciplines get up in a meeting of his fellows and say the time had come for some real attention to be given to the after-history of patients. The idea seemed like a good one to me—fifty years and more is long enough to wait to begin wondering what happens to patients when they quit taking treatments. There is, I believe, some hope in this field—but I think it can be said with a degree of certainty, that hope does not lie in the direction of permanent exorcism of evil. Men will continue to be equal and unequal in this most important respect. On this subject America has nothing worth saying to the rest of the world.

Is there in any American book of recent decades any statement of the meaning of democracy in the genuine and older American sense and in the universal sense—not in the latter-day sense of it costs *us nothing*—comparable to that of Pericles' Funeral Oration? Is there any better statement in American literature of the problem of authority versus natural rights than in *Antigone*? Is there anything in American literature on how a good man may become evil remotely comparable to passages in Plato's *Republic*? Modern America the school of the world? If so, and if the doctrine it costs *us nothing* continues to prevail, I can only say God pity the world.

This doctrine is a powerful thing. Wherever it prevails any and every expert on the subject will be able to prove, and will prove, if it is to his interest to do so, that a cartel is not equal to a cartel. How could an American trade association in any way whatever be equal to a German trade association? The charge was made a few years ago, as everyone knows, that certain

American business interests were involved in deals with German cartels; but charges of this kind always involve somebody else. We, ourselves, good Americans that we are, could not possibly slip into engaging in cartel-like activities. The notion is too abhorrent, therefore it is impossible.

Nevertheless, the idea persists, any two men are exactly alike in certain important respects, yet one may be a Nazi and the other a good American. And the Nazi may shed his Nazism and the American take it on. All men are exactly equal in that all possess a capacity for evil, and the man with the capacity for the best is the man with the capacity for the worst. There is no doubt about it, but where will you find this idea developed (or recognized if by chance it is developed) in an American book?

Can it really be that in spite of all our talking and writing about equality, and bowing and scraping before it, Americans believe themselves superior?

Is there any chance, if America continues proposing itself as the teacher of the rest of the world that some suspicions of America's real opinion of itself may get abroad? Suppose the rest of the world doesn't want to learn all that America wants to teach. How long will it be before America will adopt as a regular procedure the counsel of the fanatic, the splitting of heads to put sense in? Does the currently dominant America, the home of it *costs us nothing*, know how to teach any better than it knows what to teach?

V

And finally there is the Great God Trend. There is none equal to him. Everybody obeys, everybody follows him. He destroys those who do not worship and go along with him.

You do not believe in this God?

Try not following, try to persuade others not to follow and see whether you are free and what you are equal to.

You are not up to date, you are a reactionary. You don't know what's going on in the world. You are still traveling mentally in a horse and buggy.

Look around you. Every nation in the world is tightly con-

trolled. Everybody everywhere belongs to a pressure group. Everybody is pushing his pressure group to push his government to push his interests. You don't want to push? Then you get run over and that's the last of you. It costs you nothing—what are you whining about? You have a conscience? Go, see a psychoanalyst. Get rid of it.

Is this the story over again of the swine filled with evil spirits rushing to destruction? Is this what happened in Germany? Can Americans follow this God and escape disaster? Or is there a special dispensation for Americans?



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